

Testimony of Setta Mushegian

In Support of SB203, AAC A State-Wide Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness Program

February 26, 2014

Senator Bartolomeo and State Representative Urban,

My name is Setta Mushegian and I am a resident of Stamford, CT. I am currently the Director of Crisis Counseling and Advocacy at The Center for Sexual Assault Crisis Counseling and Education (The Center). Prior to becoming the Director of Crisis Counseling and Advocacy I acted as one of our Community Educators. In addition to my current counseling and advocacy responsibilities I provide certification training for both Stamford and Norwalk Police Department and educational trainings for medical professionals. I currently sit on the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services Board of Directors, The Governor's Task Force on Justice for Abused Children Multidisciplinary Team Evaluation Committee and act as co-chair of the Child Sexual Abuse Response Team (SART) of Darien, Greenwich and Stamford.

As a member of the SART team I have seen and experienced first hand the impact of sexual abuse on children and their families. I have also seen and experienced first hand the impact that educational presentations for children regarding sexual abuse can have on a child's ability to disclose when something has happened to them and to feel supported when they do come forward. Children will not know where to report sexual violence without first having the language and knowledge to describe what it is. It is for these reasons that I stand behind SB203, AAC A State-Wide Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness Program although I would like to encourage the use of the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Centers (CONNSACS) and their nine member centers to create and implement this educational programming. CONNSACS is a statewide coalition of individual sexual assault crisis programs and works to end sexual violence through victim assistance, community education, and public policy advocacy. The Center is one of CONNSACS' member centers.

The Center's Community Education Department currently provides developmentally appropriate education about sexual violence to children K-12, police officers, medical professionals, college students and community members. In the 2012-2013 fiscal year we provided education to over 10,300 individuals and in this year we project almost doubling that number. The Center's Feeling Safe Program, which was designed to address personal safety for children, pre-school through 5th grade, is very much in line with the kind of education SB 203 proposes. "Feeling Safe" is safety education, not sex education. The lessons it teaches promote personal safety, teaching children how to identify the parts of their body that are private, who is allowed to touch those parts and what to do if they feel uncomfortable when/if someone touches their body in a way that feels uncomfortable. Each of our Community Educators is a certified sexual assault crisis counselor and is able to act

as an additional safety net so that a child knows we are a trusted resource to whom they can disclose that they have been a victim. In addition to the "Feeling Safe" program we also have educational programming available for teachers and parents so they are able to recognize signs of sexual abuse and know what to do when a child discloses.

The Center has been successful in getting the Feeling Safe Program into most of the Elementary Schools in the towns that we serve – Greenwich, Stamford, Darien, New Canaan, Norwalk, Westport, Weston and Wilton but often times because it is up to the individual school, we are not always able to reach their students. And, if we do get into the school we are not always able to provide education for their parents and teachers. If the state were to implement this type of education programming as a requirement, The Center would be able to meet this need but would need additional funding in order to do so.

Additionally I would like to add that education programming related to sexual assault/awareness is incredibly important for all age groups. The current language of the bill proposes education for students between 2nd and 5th grade – while I agree that education for this age group is important so is education for *all* school-aged children. Children need to hear these messages more than once and it needs to be reinforced by their teachers, caregivers and community members. Children need to be able to identify the parts of their body that are private, what to do if someone touches them or speaks to them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable and as they get older, understand what sexual violence is and know where to go if this happens to them. While all of this information is vital, it is also vital to begin to educate children about the subtle forms of sexual harassment that create a culture in which sexual violence occurs and to encourage children and communities to intervene when they see something, whether it's sexual harassment or a situation which they know may lead to sexual violence.

Thank you for your time,

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